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ABSTRACT

This occasional paper discusses and examines the role of history as a link between the past and the future. The paper advocates one of the tasks of historians is to keep the present in reasonable touch with the past and with the hope of helping the present to accept and understand the future when it comes. The report cites the declining enrollment in the number of history degrees granted by colleges during the years 1970-71 to 1985-86 as an example of the disinterest in history. This decline occurred during years of sharp increases in the number of college students. The paper cautions against the misuse of history as propaganda and suggests that history contains both science and art, in indeed a "craft." (EH)

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OCCASIONAL PAPER

National Council for History Education, Inc.

promoting history in school and society

The Future of History

by C. Vann Woodward

I should like to open my remarks on The Future of History with an epigram I used to begin a book entitled **The Future of the Past** that I published six years ago. It consists of three lines, not by a historian but by a poet, T.S. Eliot, from his work entitled *Burnt Norton:*

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.

I beg you not to misread my use of these lines from Eliot and interpret me as approving the confusion of past and present by historians and teachers, or as endowing either with the gift of prophecy, of predicting the future. Rather I use Eliot to support my belief that one of the tasks historians should feel obliged to assume is to keep the present in reasonable touch with the past and with the cautious hope of helping the present to accept and understand the future when it comes.

This is no easy assignment. For one thing time is forever putting distance between the present and past and more often than not obscuring the latter. Another is the eagerness of writers of fiction, drama, film and television to assist the historian and even to replace him entirely by outdoing him in fulfilling the public needs, expectations and tastes, its biases, vanities, nostalgias, and fantasies. Or by their willingness to sanitize, gentrify, or romanticize the past. Or to promote national pride and patriotism by covering up shameful events and deeds.

To cope with such competition I certainly do not hold that we should imitate the methods of our competitors, violate our own standards and rules and degrade our profession. But at the same time I think it would be a bad mistake to respond by ignoring the legitimate needs and interests of students and public in their past. That writers and teachers of history have too often done so helps explain the sharp decline of student patronage. It is difficult to determine the decline in secondary schools, where courses are required. But the number of history degrees granted by colleges dropped from 44,663 in 1970-71 to 16,413 in 1985-86—though these were years of sharp increase in the number of college students. While history enrollments have improved lately they are still far from recovering from earlier losses.

I have warned against some wrong-headed means used to recover the appeal history should have, and there are still other such means. One is to use history as propaganda to promote popular political causes, movements, and reforms, and to redress past injustice to minority victims. To misuse history, as to misuse any of the humanities in these ways, is to corrupt and degrade them as much as comparable misuse corrupts and degrades our judiciary, our courts, and trial by jury.

Yet I cling to the conviction that the historian has a special tradition, privilege, and duty to address the general public as well as academics and specialists. His is the only learned discipline so privileged, one of the few disciplines that requires no vocabulary unfamiliar to the public, a public that may expect to read history not only for information but for pleasure. One of the oldest, if not *the* oldest of disciplines, it has accumulated long shelves of classics dating back to the ancient Greeks that offer proof of this. Yet there are to this day historians who debate whether they are men of letters or men of science. The assumption behind the question is that it has to be one thing or the other and cannot be both—or some **tertium quid** that is neither. Personally, I lean to the **tertium quid** idea and think of history as a "third something."

This is not to deny, however, that good history may, and often must, contain both science and art. I prefer the word "craft." And any craft devoted to the understanding of human behavior, past or present, without what help is available from the behavioral sciences deserves to be ignored. But on the other hand, any craft that normally sets forth its findings in prose under the assumption that this can be done successfully wholly without resort to art is proceeding with an innocence that handicaps the whole enterprise.

Personally, I take comfort in the reflection that if history is indeed a science, it's the only one that has an authentic Greek muse. Her name is Clio, one of the nine daughters of Zeus, each of whom presided over a different art or science. Her name derives from the Greek word meaning to tell.√

***C. Vann Woodward** is Emeritus historian at Yale University. He served on the Bradley Commission on History in Schools and is the author of many books including **The Strange Career of Jim Crow**. He gave this talk as part of a panel on "The Future of History," at the 1995 NCHE National Conference at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, on October 8th, 1995. The other panelists were Spencer Crew, Director of the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian; author/biographer and PBS host/narrator David McCullough; master classroom teacher Betty B. Franks, Maple Heights, Ohio; and education specialist on technology Lynn Fontana of George Mason University. The panel was moderated by Allan L. Damon, historian and master classroom teacher (emeritus), Horace Greeley High School, Chappaqua, New York.*